



Wasco County Soil and Water Conservation District
Board Meeting Minutes – January 3, 2024

Directors: Bill Hammel Ken Bailey Stan Shephard
Larry Powell Bob Krein

Directors via Teleconference: Phil Kaser

Directors Absent: Shawn Sorensen

Staff: Shilah Olson Josh Thompson Jennifer Sampson
Abbie Forrest Drake Gilbert Scott Susi

Staff via Teleconference: Karen Lamson Ryan Bessette

Guests:

NRCS: Emily Huth, District Conservationist
FSA: Lissa Biehn, County Executive Director
Wasco SWCD: Pat Davis, Director Emeritus
Wheatland Ins: John Anderson

Guests via Teleconference:

Wy'East RC&D: Robert Wallace, Executive Director
OSU Extension: Jacob Powell, County Agent

1:00 PM Call to Order

Bill called the meeting to order and asked if there were any additions to the agenda. Shilah added an update on the Lower Deschutes CWMA, time allowing.

Minutes: Bill asked if there were any additions or corrections to the December board meeting minutes. None were made. *Ken moved to approve the December meeting minutes as presented; Stan seconded. Motion carried unanimously.*

Treasurer's Report: Shilah reported the December Treasurer's Report was tabled until February. Shilah presented a draft report on the District's current outstanding loans, as requested by Ken, and asked the board for feedback. Ken pointed out a couple errors in the document and requested the loan interest rate be displayed in the report. Jennifer will make those corrections to be included with the Treasurer's Report at the next meeting.

Public Comment (5 Min. limit/person) – None at this time.

Wheatland Insurance Renewal Update – John Anderson

John Anderson introduced himself to the board and led a discussion on the District’s insurance. John shared that he met with Shilah and Jennifer in November to discuss the renewal, and the premiums will increase by roughly 12%. Shilah did complete the requirements to receive a 10% discount for the SDAO Best Practices checklist. A few of the deductibles on vehicles were adjusted to reflect current inflation and the value of aging vehicles. Currently the District is carrying \$5 million in liability insurance and John confirmed for the SWCD’s size that was a good level to be at. John also mentioned the District’s crime coverage, which includes financial fraud and embezzlement, is currently at \$100,000. Discussion ensued on the level of crime coverage and if the District should increase that amount. *Ken moved to increase the financial fraud crime coverage from \$100,000 to \$250,000; Stan seconded. Motion carried unanimously.*

Discussion ensued concerning how fire risk assessment has affected insurance premiums, many resulting in higher premium costs or a refusal to provide coverage all together. Shilah mentioned that OACD is providing a legislative advocacy training session if anyone is interested in attending. John closed by saying that he will be attending the SDAO conference in February, and he looked forward to seeing some of the District staff there.

Action Items

a. Office Elections – Shilah reviewed the current officer positions: Bill is Chairman, Bob is Vice-Chair, Shawn is Secretary/Treasurer. With those positions, Bill and Shawn are signers on the bank accounts. *Ken moved to re-elect Bill as Chairman, Bob as Vice-Chair, and Shawn as Secretary/Treasurer for 2024; Stan seconded. Motion carried unanimously.*

b. Budget Committee Appointments – Shilah reported there are two budget committee appointees whose terms are expiring: Brian Tuck and Robert Wallace. Both have expressed willingness to continue serving on the committee. The budget committee consists of seven elected SWCD board members and seven appointed registered voters in Wasco County. Last year the board also appointed an alternate, Chris Sorensen. *Phil moved to reappoint Brian Tuck and Robert Wallace, and reappoint Chris Sorensen as an alternate; Bob seconded. Motion carried unanimously.*

c. Policy Review: Associate Director Appointments – Shilah reported the Associate Director Policy was emailed to the board and is included in the meeting packet. This policy has been in place since 1993. The policy does not need action on it today, but Shilah requested the board review it and see if it needs updating. It was noted that the “Director Emeritus” appointment is retained for life. Discussion ensued on associate directors, and it was noted there is no requirement for the board to have associate directors, but it can be a useful tool for recruiting future board members as well as bring different perspectives and knowledge to the table. Shilah confirmed Bryce Molesworth is still on the roster as an Associate Director, however he stepped down from active roles a couple of years ago; board consensus was to remove him from the associate director list. It was confirmed that associate directors can be added at any point during the year. Shilah encouraged the board to recruit anyone interested to become associate directors.

d. Cost Share Requests – Abbie presented three haul road district cost share applications for Tyler Myers, Lester Lindell, and The WHAT LLC. Scott looked at these projects and approved

them. All three projects requested the maximum of \$3,000. Abbie reported there is currently \$20,000 left in the district cost share budget, which includes both haul roads and other conservation projects. Abbie suggested when the board considers cost share policies during budgeting, they might want to amend haul road projects to include “heavy use” areas as opposed to strictly roads. For example, the road to go to a pivot or the path used to get hay for cattle, etc. *Bob moved to approve the haul road cost share applications for Tyler Myers, Lester Lindell, and The WHAT LLC; Stan seconded. Motion carried unanimously.*

e. Bereavement Leave Policy – Shilah reported the current bereavement leave policy provides three days of paid leave when an employee has a covered loss. She requested the board increase it to a total of five days per covered loss. She provided verbiage on what constitutes a family member, which she found in the Oregon Family Leave Act. Shilah will work on writing a complete bereavement leave policy, and board consensus was to include a caveat that the District Manager can use their own judgement to conclude whether a loss is covered or not if it does not fall into a strict definition of family. *Larry moved to increase bereavement leave from three days of paid leave to five days of paid leave per covered loss; Bob seconded. Motion carried unanimously.*

f. FY 2023-24 Audit Services – Shilah reported the District’s audit firm, RTO, resigned mid contract as they no longer have the staff to perform audits. No board action is needed at this time, but Shilah requested feedback from the board on their preferred method of finding a new auditor. Shilah has reached out to other districts to seek recommendations for auditors. She believes this constitutes a professional services contract where the board can direct appoint a contractor up to \$50,000. Currently there are no firms in The Dalles or Hood River that provide audit services. Discussion ensued. Board consensus was to ask other SWCDs to see who they use and attempt to get some audit cost estimates.

Updates

a. Next Meeting - The next regular meeting is scheduled for February 7, 2024, at 1:00 PM, at the USDA Service Center and via Zoom.

b. SDAO Annual Conference – Feb 8-11, 2024 – Seaside – Shilah reported that she, Jennifer, Shawn, and Samantha are planning to attend the conference. If anyone is interested in also attending it is not too late to register. This conference focuses on risk management training, networking, and includes special districts of all kinds in Oregon.

c. Pesticide Stewardship Partnership (PSP) Strategic Planning – Shilah reported she sent the board a copy of a news article and a letter from OFS to Oregon Pesticide Stewardship Partnership Staff (ODA and DEQ) via email and both are included in the meeting packet. Shilah noted there are some concerns surrounding the PSP program and asked Ken to speak on it. Ken shared that several grower groups are concerned about data from the PSP program and how it might be misinterpreted. DEQ has been storing and analyzing all the zero or “non-detect” PSP samples separately from the samples with pesticide detections, and there are concerns that this could be used against producers as it does not reflect the complete picture surrounding pesticides. Shilah will be joining a meeting with ODA and DEQ next week, and she wanted the board to be aware of this issue in case additional concerns arise or if we need to make changes to our local program.

d. Neighborhood Meetings – Shilah reported it is part of the District’s strategic plan to conduct outreach meetings with local producers, and there will be a pesticide presentation in the spring, usually March. She was considering combining the two activities but wants to wait until she hears back from ODA and DEQ. COVID caused a shutdown of neighborhood meetings, and now Shilah is asking for board input on how they should be conducted in the future. Discussion ensued on the neighborhood meetings and annual meetings. Board consensus was to attempt to have neighborhood meetings at a restaurant, or a venue where people can socialize afterwards if wanted. And it was suggested that if there is important information to share it would be worth having neighborhood meetings, but not to have a meeting just to have a meeting.

e. 15Mile Managed Underground Storage (MUS) – Josh reported there have been no changes since the last board meeting. Staff completed reporting to OWEB and OWRD on the project. Shilah sent a contract to GSI based on the new OWEB grant, but things have been delayed because of the holidays. Pat asked if there was a manufactured filter medium, versus the problematic sand, that could work on the project. Josh shared that OSU is working on that problem and testing various options for filter mediums, including mechanical filters, that will not change the pH of the water.

f. Highline Ditch Elimination – Josh reported he extended the grant one last time, and will be working to get that project finished up. They are considering installing a FCA screen.

g. 2020 White River Fire & 2022 Miller Road Fire – Josh reported the District still has a couple of active grants for the fires. They intend to contract out woody debris removal, and contracted an open range G application in late September for the White River Fire. They still have seeding remaining to be completed on the White River Fire. Wasco County applied for a forest service grant for defensible space and fuel reduction work. Tygh Valley and Juniper Flat Fire Departments did not feel equipped to deal with the contracting, so they asked the District to do the contracting for them. The SWCD will retain the admin funds for handling the contracting for them, assuming the grant is awarded.

h. Mosier Million #2 – Josh reported the Mosier Million is on hold. The District needs to get bids on the first set of wells, followed by getting the contract written and signed, and then the contractor can begin work on the wells. Discussion ensued.

i. Poster Contest Update – Shilah reported three kids from Wasco County will be participating in the NACD Poster Contest at the national level. Their posters will be voted on during the NACD conference in February.

j. Lower Deschutes CWMA – Shilah reported the Lower Deschutes CWMA has been shut down for the time being. The program may or may not return as they had to terminate the person in charge of it. Given this development, she does not anticipate they will invoice the District for the usual financial contribution. While the District is in process of developing their own weed program, it is still in early stages. At the moment they are focused on EDRR (Early Detection, Rapid Response) on new-to-the-area noxious weeds, but over time staff may be able to assist with well-established weeds in the area as well.

Agency Reports

a. **NRCS** – Emily reported she is working on planning the local work group meeting. Sam has been assisting her with the organization. They are thinking they will host the meeting in the last couple of weeks in February at possibly Spooky’s or other locations in Dufur. A new Soil Conservationist Tech, Erin, will be joining NRCS on January 16th. Erin lives in The Dalles and is working on her graduate degree from OSU in forestry. They received a lot of EQIP applications for rangeland, fire cleanup, juniper encroachment, and other practices for approximately \$2 million. She has been told they have IRA funds coming, but she hasn’t seen those funds yet. It will likely get thrown at them at the last minute. The CSP application deadline is March 29th. There is a new person as the Oregon Wheat League/NRCS Liaison and she might ask them to host a wheat crop focused meeting on CSP enhancements. Next week, she will be attending the Direct Seed Conference in Tri Cities. Shilah shared the District was awarded the NACD grant so they have continued funds to assist Emily, but the award was reduced by 75% of the requested grant amount so she will have to adjust the work plan with Emily.

b. **FSA** – Lissa wished everyone a Happy New Year. She reported interviews for the Program Technician position will take place tomorrow and next Thursday. Tiffany’s programs have been disbursed to remaining FSA staff, so they’re still working on ECP for the Miller Road Fire, farm loans, and market assistance loans. Kristianna took over acreage reporting. Lissa shared that Emily and Carly have done a great job on the EQIP applications and she hopes they all get funded. Applications for emergency livestock assistance, honey bees, and farm raised fish are due January 30th. Talk to Lissa if you have hauled feed farther than normal, moved livestock around farther than normal, or hauled more water than normal due to drought. They are still working on LFP. ARC/PLC normally has signups starting October 1st, but that was delayed due to not having a farm bill, so the signup has been shortened from now to March 15th. Acreage reporting for fruit is due January 15th. They are working on ECP to pay Miller Road Fire victims.

c. **OSU Extension** – Jacob reported he held pesticide trainings in November and December in The Dalles. Josh attended some of those to remind attendees of the resources the SWCD can offer. He shared 16 producers attended a discussion on PSP, where they looked at pesticide drift from sprinklers, nozzle size, etc. He has seen more pesticide drift this last year than other years, mainly glyphosate. A lot of people are spraying when it’s more humid in the fall, and glyphosate has a tendency to attach to moisture in the air. So, if we’re in an inversion and it’s humid, there will be more drift in the dew to other plants. Last year, he conducted microbial trials on wheat and he is currently analyzing that data. He is checking nitrogen rates to see if these products work better. He will be attending the Direct Seed Conference next week. Jacob will be conducting another year of trials on microbial products to compare different precipitation amounts from last year. On January 23rd, he will be hosting a Beef Quality Assurance training in The Dalles. It is not a requirement to be BQA certified yet, but beef production is moving that direction. The training will cost \$10 and includes lunch. On January 25th, he will be hosting a soil pH workshop with researchers from WSU and OSU presenting on their trials, management practices, soil acidification, etc. He thinks the neighborhood meetings are a good idea if there is something to talk about, but doesn’t want to attend frivolous meetings. In the past, the SWCD has worked with Brian Tuck on cover crop trials. Jacob suggested it might be beneficial to consider a collaboration between NRCS, OSU Extension, and the SWCD about which cover crops work and which ones don’t. NCLA will have a bull tour on March 23rd, but instead of touring

farms it will stay in one location, at the new pavilion at Sherman County Fairgrounds and be more of a livestock expo.

d. Wy'East RC&D – Shilah reported that Robert had to leave the meeting, but she relayed his updates to the board in his place. She noted Wy'East is currently leasing the office space in Suite 4. Wy'East is making some contract changes on how they provide assistance to farmers as they are no longer contracted under BPA for irrigation upgrades. They will be meeting with local utilities to see how they can be of assistance. Wy'East intends to hire a couple of new staff members and is looking for new board members if anyone is interested. The next board meeting will be January 18th at the USDA service center.

Committee Reports

a. Audit Committee – The audit committee had nothing to report.

b. Facilities Committee – Abbie reported that Josh plans to schedule a facilities committee meeting before the February board meeting. Shilah shared that they just installed a new furnace and received a safety and security grant from SDAO. The Custodian is doing well but is still waiting on her background check. Drake proposed the District purchase a power washer to clean vehicles after going out in the field. He will present this at the next facilities committee meeting.

c. Watershed Council Updates – Drake reported The Dalles watershed council will meet next Wednesday. Normally he would provide a SNOTEL update but there has not been much snow to report. Snowpack in the basin is at 19% so he will wait until March to discuss that. The Mosier watershed council will meet on January 24th. He is assisting with the organization of Neighborhood meetings, which will likely include a White River and Bakeoven watershed council meeting. The Coordinating Board will meet following the February board meeting.

District Manager Report

a. Work Plan Progress & Grant Status – Shilah reported the work plan progress report and the grant status report were emailed and included in the meeting packets. For the work plan, thus far tasks are on track, with the exception of conservation partnership awards as there have not been any opportunities for that. The Tree Sale order deadline is January 19th. Jennifer reminded the board that tree orders can be placed on the District website as well as in the office. The District currently has 27 open grants with \$2.3 million grant funds remaining. Since 1990, the District has completed 338 grants and approximately \$19.5 million.

b. Activity Reports and Schedules – No activity reports were presented; however, they are available for review upon request. The schedule was distributed with the agenda.

Bill wished everyone a Happy New Year.

Adjourned: 3:00pm

Jennifer Sampson